DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 472 661 JC 030 105

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TITLE	Climbing Out of the Well.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	9p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Articulation (Education); *College Transfer Students; Community Colleges; Cooperative Programs; Curriculum; Educational Cooperation; *Educational Innovation; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Shared Resources and Services; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	*Seattle Central Community College WA; *University of Washington

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the Coordinated Studies program developed by Seattle Central Community College (SCCC), Washington, in cooperation with the University of Washington (UW). Coordinated Studies was developed in response to SCCC transfer students who reported feeling anxiety about transferring to four-year universities. Coordinated Studies are theme-oriented interdisciplinary programs or learning communities with two faculty for 13-credit programs, and three to four faculty from different disciplines for 18-credit programs. The curriculum is organized around themes that involve inquiry, identifying issues, solving problems, and proposing solutions. The SCCC team that developed the program decided that the site of the first one-quarter community college class would be the UW campus. Linking courses in the math/science division with humanities and social sciences has always been a challenge in learning communities. The authors identify two major challenges: (1) recruiting an instructor with a teaching style and willingness that allow possible major changes in curriculum; and (2) developing a learning community that does not compromise the goals of the math/science course. According to a survey, 94.4% of students in the class found it to be stimulating, and 70.4% reported they were either excited or were more confident about transferring. After the 11-week quarter, a majority of students felt a stronger connection to the university. (Author/NB)

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CLIMBING OUT OF THE WELL

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ED 472 661

"Outnumbered, isolated and unsupported" are anxieties that students at Seattle Central Community College (SCCC) express about transferring to four-year universities, especially the University of Washington (UW). Sara Hebel reported these students' preconceptions in The Chronicle of Higher Education article "From Seattle Central Community College, the View of the Big University" (A36-37). Students wanted "communality, a network of human relationships that created a sense of belonging and connection" to the UW (Bass 110-111).

Responding to the community college students' concerns about transferring, faculty and administrators from SCCC and the UW initiated a project in Spring 2001 to help alleviate students' apprehension of moving from a two-year institution on to a four-year university. The objectives were three-fold: (1) to develop a innovative curriculum for SCCC that met A.A. degree requirements, fulfilled transferable credits, and was interdisciplinary; (2) to acclimate SCCC students to the UW by giving them access to the same resources and privileges as UW students; and (3) to evaluate the project's effectiveness.

The vision was to use the Coordinated Studies model to instigate a "role shift," a shift in our students' thinking of what they saw as the norm in their personal life course progressions. Coordinated Studies are theme-oriented interdisciplinary programs or learning communities with two faculty for 13 credit programs and 3 to 4 faculty from different disciplines for an 18 credit program. The curriculum is organized around themes that involve inquiring, identifying issues, solving problems, and proposing solutions.

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The SCCC team developed an 18-credit learning community called "Climbing out of the Well", a title chosen based on this quote from Mao Tse-Tung: "We think too small, like the frog at the bottom of the well. He thinks the sky is only as big as the top of the well. If he surfaced, he would have an entirely different view." The team used this quote as the inspiration and linked Biology 100, Biological Principles; Sociology 150, Race and Ethnic Relations; English Composition 101/102; and Humanities 105, Intercultural Communications. Three primary questions connected these disciplines: How do biology and sociology hold the perceived world together? What are common patterns of social activities in living organisms? And how do we become sociologically mindful in order to change our world? The team decided that the site of this one-quarter community college class would be the UW campus located about three miles away from the urban setting of the SCCC campus.

Not only the location for this course but also the linkage of disciplines included in the learning community was innovative. Linking courses in the math/science division (such as biology) with humanities and social sciences has always been a challenge in learning communities. Perceptions that math/sciences are content-heavy curricula and that learning communities do not allow faculty to cover all of their material create barriers to interdisciplinary teaching. This problem is especially true for a math or science class that is part of a sequence which covers certain material systematically to prepare students for the next step. Even for courses that don't have that sort of pressure, modifications to meet the learning community model seem daunting. It is difficult to forgo material that an instructor traditionally has included in a course, but the nature of activities incorporated into learning communities calls for a different teaching approach. For example, at SCCC a typical biology class would meet seven hours each week.

In a learning community with 18 class-hours, a biology instructor has less time to present or lead activities that address basic biology concepts alone. Instead, the community spends considerable time investigating connections between disciplines whenever possible. Hence the challenges of (1) recruiting an instructor with a teaching style and willingness to perhaps make major adjustment in a curriculum, and (2) developing a learning community that doesn't compromise the goals of the math/science course.

We selected Biology 100, a class that fulfills A.A. graduation requirements for a lab science. Enrollees usually are not planning to major in a science. Because this course is not a prerequisite for another course, it does not have to cover a specific set of chapters in a specific textbook. This flexibility allowed the biology instructor to select relevant topics that connected with and complemented the other disciplines. Inevitably, the instructor has to be willing to teach concepts. The trade-off is that students are learn biology concepts in the context of other reading assignments. Students also learn more on their own than they would in a discreet biology course. The weekly two-hour laboratory provides the hands-on experience that reinforces learning biological concepts.

From this planning comes pedagogy, which has moved from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning. Within the learning community, students engaged in twice-weekly seminars, writing and reading workshops, media projects and presentations, biology labs and quizzes and applied sociological research tools.

To facilitate inquiry into the theme from an interdisciplinary approach, students immersed themselves into a readings packet of selected short stories and seven books:

Card, Orson Scott *Speaker for the Dead*

Etcoff, Nancy	*Survival of the Prettiest*
Hacker, Diana.	*Bedford Handbook for Writers*
Hooks, Bell.	*Where We Stand: Class Matters*
Lazarre, Jane	*Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*
Schwalbe, Michael	*The Sociologically Examined Life*
Starr, Cecie	*Basic Concepts in Biology*

The faculty team designed interdisciplinary writing activities. In each assignment students uncovered themes found in the readings and applied sociological and biological theories and concepts to help support their themes or theses. For example, students agreed or disagreed with the assertion: "Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder." Supporting their position, they had to use biological and sociological reasons from *Survival of the Prettiest,* selected chapters in *Basic Concepts in Biology,* films, and lectures. Other writing assignments included seminar response essays, field and expanded notes about campus observations, films, speakers, and research using the scientific method.

Through readings, films, laboratory exercises, and discussion groups, students increasingly made connections not just between themselves and other humans but with other organisms. For example, the class saw the video "Cane Toads" in which Australian agricultural scientists brought beetle-eating toads from Hawaii to control the cane beetles that were destroying Australia's cane crop in the early 1930's. Rather than helping the situation in Australia, the toads adapted to the environment and ate everything except cane beetles. The Australians' socially constructed perceptions of the toads also proved to be problematic, varying from one extreme to the other. Some people accepted them as pets and enjoyed their friendly singing, even dressing them up in doll clothes. Others perceived the toads as a menace because when attacked, the toads

released venom that killed their predators including birds and house pets. Many people went out of their way to drive over and kill as many of the toads as possible. Other folks figured out how to make a hallucinogenic drug from toad venom thus altering their perception of the world. This difference in perception divided whole towns, as well as the neighboring vicinity as the cane toads rapidly reproduced and increased their geographical range. The video effectively introduced the concepts of scientific process, exotic species, and social constructions of reality. Students enjoyed the irony of the situation and quickly observed commonalties between the cane toad controversy and how they themselves constructed values, norms, and roles in their own personal lives.

In addition to relevant curriculum, SCCC students and faculty were excited about meeting on the UW campus and having access to its facilities. The UW wanted SCCC students to have rich experiences to help them decide to select the UW to further their educational goals. Consequently, students received ID cards for computer access and library privileges, access SCCC students do not usually have for the University. UW counselors and transfer advisors came to our class and were accessible after class to answer questions. This contact with UW staff allowed the students to put a face to the large institution. UW student ambassadors also visited our class and discussed the positives and negatives of their transfer experiences. SCCC students met in a renovated high technology classroom in Mary Gates Hall, the center of the campus. In this same hall, UW gave SCCC faculty office space, seminar rooms, and technical classroom support. Our students were developing a sense of communality. They actually had a space to "hang out" before and after class and experience the daily exchange with students from the "U". Faculty observed students increasing self-confidence, picturing themselves attending a university, and telling their friends that they were

"U-dub" students. Ideally both schools had hoped to have UW students enroll in the class; however, the class filled very quickly with SCCC students. In the future, faculty still see integration as a very important component to this class and would hope to enroll students from both institutions in the class.

As the project progressed, more students climbed to the top of their own personal "wells" and saw different views of the "big impersonal university." Students enjoyed the UW campus, which offered beautiful buildings, landscaping, and activities such as meeting under shade trees at seminar time, eating at the Hub, and discovering the abundance of library resources. Several activities demonstrated parallels between human society and nature. On campus walks during breaks, students observed and recorded patterns in structure and diversity of plant life and compared them with patterns of race, class, gender, and human interactions. Walks to the green house to observe rare plants such as the foul smelling corpse flower (*Amorphophallus titanum)* were among regular learning experiences that demonstrated diversity in nature as well as in society. Such parallels would not have been possible on the urban SCCC campus.

During the quarter, students experienced on a daily basis not only the view of several disciplines that the learning community format makes possible, but also the wide range of opportunities and facilities available at a four-year university campus.

To evaluate the project, the UW Office of Education Assessment and SCCC faculty developed a survey to statistically measure some of the project outcomes. The survey included multiple-choice and short-answer sections; its stated purpose was to provide information for future planning. Fifty-four of the fifty-nine students enrolled in the class responded to the questionnaire, a 92% response rate. Following are some of the survey's findings:

Response Percentages and Means

		Very Poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Me
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
1	The course content was:	0.0	1.9	7.4	27.8	40.7	22.2	4.7
2	The effectiveness of this learning community at the UW was:	0.0	3.7	16.7	16.7	27.8	35.2	4.7
3	Instructor's use of examples and illustrations was:	0.0	1.9	14.8	27.8	27.8	27.8	4.6
4	Student confidence in instructors' knowledge was:	0.0	5.6	16.7	18.5	25.9	33.3	4.6
5	Encouragement given to students to express themselves was:	0.0	5.6	13.0	29.6	16.7	35.2	4.6
6	Amount you learned in the course was:	3.7	3.7	13.0	22.2	27.8	29.6	4.5
7	Usefulness of course content was:	1.9	1.9	11.1	20.4	29.6	35.2	4.8
8	Instructor's enthusiasm was:	0.0	1.9	9.4	18.9	26.4	43.4	5.0

Along with the above multiple-choice questions, students answered several open ended questions. Most students, 94.4%, found the learning community intellectually stimulating, with comments such as "I have new ways to look at things now." When asked what UW resources where used, libraries were the most highly rated with 85.2%, along with computer labs 53.7% and common areas 31.5%. One of the most telling questions, however, was "How did having this learning community on the UW campus change your attitude about transferring to a 4-year university?" From this question 35.2% responded that they were excited to transfer, and another 35.2% responded that they were more confident that they could transfer, and the UW is less intimidating.

After the eleven-week quarter, a majority of the students did not see themselves as isolated or unsupported, but felt a stronger connection and sense of belonging in the "big university". They acquired a sense of confidence that

came with knowing the right questions to ask and how to navigate the campus to find who would help them get answers. Many students felt comfortable and were ready to make plans to transfer when they completed their Associates Degrees. The UW and SCCC both benefited from this project; students, faculty, administrators, and staff also built communality and started to create a pattern of success for our students.

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